Navigating a Pandemic, Racial Disparities, and Social Work Education through the Lens of the NASW Code of Ethics

Danielle C. Swick, Yarneccia D. Dyson, and Elizabeth (Beth) Webb

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic introduced several challenges for social work education. Beyond the blanket effects, the pandemic made clearer the racial health disparities that impact Black Americans—a stress further exacerbated as the United States was rocked by the brutal killings of multiple Black individuals. In the social work profession, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics underlies the delivery of both social work practice and social work education. In this paper, we describe how we used three ethical principles from the NASW Code of Ethics (social justice, dignity and worth, and human relationships) to guide us in altering our department's approach to social work education during the pandemic in the spirit of social justice, equity, and inclusivity.

Keywords: racism, COVID-19, social justice, dignity and worth, human relationships

We are three female professors teaching in an undergraduate- and master's-level social work program located in the Southeast region of the United States. During the spring of 2020, we were not only shifting our professional work virtually, but also actively parenting and transitioning our school-age children to a remote learning platform. Balancing professional and familial responsibilities further equipped us to approach our work with a student-centered view as we experienced firsthand the complexities of balancing multiple roles during the early months of the global pandemic. Danielle identifies as a white, Jewish female who is a tenured associate professor and associate department chair and has been teaching for 10 years. Yarneccia identifies as a Black female; she is on the tenure track, has been teaching over eight years, and was a first-generation college student. Beth identifies as a white female and is a non-tenure track professor who has been teaching for five years.

Our focus lies specifically on three ethical principles because they align with our desire to remain student-centered (reflecting the principles of "dignity and worth" and "human relationships") and responsive to the impacts of racial injustice and the global pandemic on our students (reflecting the principle of "social justice"). While the other ethical principles described in the NASW Code of Ethics are centrally important to social work, they are more applicable to social work practice with clients and the larger community. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on the three ethical principles we see as central to working with students and preparing them to become equity-minded and culturally responsive practitioners.

Ethical Principle: "Social Workers Challenge Social Injustice" (NASW, 2017)

The rise of COVID-19 during the spring of 2020 exposed the disproportionate morbidity and mortality rates of the disease on Black people in the United States. Several factors, including the persistence of chronic health disorders such as hypertension and diabetes, as well as structural factors such as access and utilization of medical services, are directly linked to years of racism

and implicit bias in the healthcare system among this population (Killerby et al., 2020; Millett et al., 2020; Price-Haywood et al., 2020; Stokes et al., 2020). Milam together with a group of Black physicians and public health professionals (2020) published an article after the onset of the pandemic that highlighted the impact of racial implicit bias in the healthcare system and the need for a health equity lens when working with Black people and others from populations who are at risk of biased treatment. A leading theme of Milam et al.'s article addresses the existence of these biases in medical personnel—biases which have been extensively documented, such as in the published work "Unequal Treatment: Report of the Institute of Medicine on Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare," where it is discussed how they may result (and have resulted) in racial and ethnic disparities within the healthcare system (Nelson, 2003, p. 12).

As the pandemic began to devastate the United States and Black communities became overwhelmed with grief due to the disproportionate rates of infection and death, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and others occurred as a direct result of the police brutality and anti-Black racism that has been long tolerated in today's society. Social injustices make clearer the need for social work educators to ensure students matriculating in programs fully understand the ethical principles of our profession challenging social injustice—so as not to be in violation of them (NASW, 2017).

Challenging social injustices that vulnerable or oppressed people experience is an ethical principle from the NASW Code of Ethics designed to empower social work practitioners for positive change (NASW, 2017). Challenging social injustices includes addressing sociopolitical and historical practices of structural and systemic racism which have resulted in Black people experiencing extreme health disparities (Bailey et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). These injustices subsequently increase their risk of becoming infected with and dying from COVID-19 (Killerby et al., 2020; Millett et al., 2020; Price-Haywood et al., 2020; Stokes et al., 2020).

Further, that increased risk of death is linked to underlying health conditions as a result of social determinants of health: lack of employment, education, or housing and the influence of racism and racialized negative perceptions of Black people (Egede & Walker, 2020). In addition, the existence of medical biases within the healthcare system, which have existed for many years, (Hall et al., 2015) has resulted in the exploitation and exacerbation of common health issues in Black people and has had a direct impact on this population having the highest rates of chronic disease and pre-existing health conditions (Paradies et al., 2015).

For the 27 percent of students at the University of North Carolina Greensboro who identify as Black or African American, navigating the social work program has largely looked much different recently due to these tragedies, all while they are trying to satisfactorily complete program requirements towards degrees in social work. Exacerbating this, in our program, over 50 percent of our students had to maintain their employment on the front lines of society as "essential workers"—within gas stations, grocery stores, and medical settings, among others. This increased their risk for disease acquisition as a result of exposure. The need for supports feels clear.

Our Response to "Challenge Social Injustice": A Call to Action

As a department of social work located in the South and grounded in an empowerment-based framework, we were strategic as well as intentional in ensuring that flexible due dates were provided for outstanding assignments—and that communication was enhanced so that students and professors were always in touch. We realized that in the spirit of challenging social injustices, we had to consider the lived experiences of students and examine how they were managing the threats of COVID-19, racial injustice, and police brutality, all while successfully completing their coursework.

We also explored how the current political climate—being in an election cycle, along with being geographically located in a conservative state that still struggles with race relations—impacted the ways in which we addressed sociopolitical factors and the subsequent effects related to racism. We understood the heaviness of carrying courses while also experiencing ambiguity about being the next potential victim for fraud or COVID-19. As a department, we also decided to allow students to choose whether or not they wanted a letter grade or a "Satisfactory" or "Unsatisfactory" mark, in the spirit of fairness and outwardly challenging the traditional Western ideology of determining learning mastery through tier-system assigned grading. Although offered, many students decided not to opt in for this opportunity, as it did not increase their grade point averages.

Students also received financial resources and support from the University as a result of the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act in order to offset any challenges that derived from COVID-19. As a strategy, we suggest that programs consider how a student's social identity may impact the way in which they experience and process social injustices, especially when circumstances hit home for them, such as Black students viewing police brutality. We also suggest that programs provide spaces and resources for students to use in managing any stress brought on by directly or indirectly experiencing social injustices. We believe that considering these things proactively will ensure programs are able to appropriately respond to student needs through outwardly acknowledging the social injustice that has occurred. We also suggest that programs consider adjusting course assignments, evaluations, and other forms of assessment as needed in order to exhibit flexibility, grace, and compassion for students who may experience anxiety related to their successful matriculation and meeting requirements for graduation.

Our Commitment to Anti-Racist Education & Creating Safe Spaces

The systemic murders of multiple Black people within six months rocked society as well as institutions of higher learning as a whole. As a Black faculty member, it has been extremely challenging for me (Yarneccia) to navigate the world while seemingly appearing unfazed, given the slaughter of Black people by law enforcement and high rates of death due to COVID-19 among friends and associates. Our Department of Social Work was the first program out of six different disciplines within a School of Health and Human Sciences to furnish a statement of solidarity written by white faculty members speaking out against racial injustice and demonstrating support to Black faculty, staff, and students. The statement of solidarity resonated for me, as well as for Black students, who represent less than 40% of those matriculating in our

social work program, as it demonstrated a programmatic action of implementing the NASW ethical principle of challenging social injustice.

At the university level, the Chancellor sent out an email to students, staff, and faculty about the current state of racial injustices, inequity, and COVID-19 (University of North Carolina Greensboro, n.d.). Upper administration also held several town hall meetings to discuss how the impact of COVID-19 was being addressed at the university level. These actions all subsequently mobilized a focus on racial equity for the University, along with the establishment of several taskforces designed to interrogate curriculums for the goals of anti-racist education and practices.

The Department of Social Work's statement of support was followed by a sigh of relief from Black students who had begun to grow concerned about the Department's possible lack of desire to challenge injustices such as racism. In addition, Black students frankly voiced expectations of advocacy and actions from their white counterparts and cautioned against performative allyship.

To this end, two forums—one for Black graduate students and one for all graduate students—were held so that students could have a space to process and share their feelings and responses while also gaining faculty support and feedback. I (Danielle) assisted in coordinating the forum for all graduate students. A Black faculty member, two Black graduate students, and two other white faculty members also assisted in coordinating the forum. During the forum, we addressed a variety of topics, including anti-Blackness, murder, trauma, white supremacy, white fragility, and solidarity versus allyship. For me, personally, the forum was a powerful experience. I was initially nervous about whether the timing of the forum was appropriate—were emotions too raw at that point to have meaningful conversations? In fact, I brought this concern up with my fellow coordinators, and they responded, "If not now, when? Why should we keep putting this off?" And that was so true. I came to realize that one of the worst things we could do in this situation was to be silent. The forum was a very small first step in a pathway to solidarity.

Our program is committed to anti-racist education (Blakeney, 2005; Kishimoto, 2018) and understands the necessity for Black students to have their own space in processing the deaths of people who looked like them—*with* people who look like them. As a Black faculty member, I (Yarneccia) more than understood the importance of this space especially as it relates to discussing racism (both overt and covert) and how racism perpetuated the effects of the pandemic and racial unrest that had far exceeded its proverbial boiling point. For some Black people, discussing racism, or even saying the word "racist," is a painful experience avoided at all costs. So, knowing this, I made sure to convey to Black students that I understood what wasn't spoken because of our shared realities of being Black in America and what experiencing systematic oppression, silencing, and erasure entails. I also realized that there is a lot of work to be done with regard to decolonizing social work education as a whole in order to advance anti-racist education, which requires critiquing policies and procedures that were developed and implemented from a white supremacist lens. The students felt comfortable and relieved to begin discussions and process the recent deaths, yet expressed their frustrations regarding the silence of their white classmates. For them, the silence equated to imposed invisibility, and it caused them to question if, in fact, their lives *did* matter to their classmates.

Professors also observed the students' responses to the racial injustice and communicated with students individually and collectively. In the classroom, professors explicitly acknowledged and discussed racial injustices. This provided students with class time to discuss what was happening in our local and broader community, and it created an environment for students to support one another. A number of students reached out to professors for guidance on how to get involved locally in community organizing efforts to protest racial injustice. The safe space in the classroom ultimately gave birth to increased advocacy and educational actions by these students, who went on to peacefully protest in speaking out against the carnage of Black lives.

I (Beth), as a white faculty member, knew it was important to explicitly address the current incidences of racial injustice and acknowledge that what was occurring outside the classroom had a direct impact on the students' lives and interactions in the classroom space. It would be harmful to students if current events were not acknowledged in the classroom setting. As social workers, we have a responsibility to challenge injustice, and our classrooms should not be exempt from this ethical principle. The week following the murder of George Floyd, one class session was spent exploring how graduate-level social work (MSW) students can incorporate anti-racist approaches into their professional work and exploring, also, a call on white MSW students to commit to learning how to address oppression and racism in their clinical work with future clients. Later, a white student shared that this classroom dialogue was timely and that providing practical ways to start their journey of incorporating an anti-racist approach in their clinical social work practice was needed. As a white social work professor, I must not just teach about anti-racism, but I must regularly and actively implement and model anti-racist approaches in the classroom and commit to lifelong personal and professional anti-racist learning even when it feels uncomfortable.

Ethical Principle: "Social Workers Respect the Inherent Dignity and Worth of the Person" (NASW, 2017)

As social workers and social work educators, for us the NASW ethical principle of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the person is central to both how we train future social workers and how we guide our own educational practice. When responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and recent events of racial injustice, we made decisions that were student-centered, taking into consideration the needs of students as individuals and as a collective. Even before the university made their university-wide decisions on safety precautions, our chair, field directors, and departmental directors proactively set into motion guidelines and supports for the students. The decisions by our leadership team were calculated and thoughtful but also swift to ensure that the most immediate and pressing physical and emotional needs of the students were identified and met.

Student Needs Identified

Through communication with students, we identified several physical challenges that students encountered in response to both COVID-19 and recent events of racial injustice. To begin, students had to navigate several housing challenges. On-campus students were given notice to leave campus, and some had to quickly relocate several hours away or to other states.

Off-campus students reported possible evictions and having to navigate the housing system to potentially avoid homelessness. In addition, students' employment was impacted as many students shifted from working part-time to full-time hours in essential jobs such as nursing homes, grocery stores, and restaurants. Students also experienced immediate shifts in their home lives as they navigated continuing their education with the increased burden of balancing homeschooling their school-aged children, caring for infants or young toddlers, and other family responsibilities. In addition, access to reliable internet was a barrier for some students, and others were only accessing the coursework on a phone with limited or no access to a laptop or tablet.

As students navigated these physical challenges related to COVID-19, they were also responding to the most recent killings of Black people across the United States by locally organizing and participating in racial justice protests. Our social work students balanced academic demands, dealt with the stress and trauma of continued racism, and responded by engaging in activist work in our community, displaying firsthand the values and ethics of future social workers. Students reported an increase in depression and anxiety and difficulty focusing on coursework. As social work educators, we acknowledged the physical and emotional needs of our students and responded by making changes to our academic approaches for students individually and collectively.

Our Response to "Respecting the Inherent Dignity and Worth of the Person"

To respond to our students' needs and to respect their inherent worth and dignity, we used the following approaches: First, instructors quickly moved their online courses to an asynchronous learning platform through actions such as developing self-paced learning modules. The shift to online learning required extensive time on our part as instructors, but provided students with the opportunity to not miss valuable coursework if they were unable to participate in live synchronous classes. Faculty also offered voluntary synchronous class sessions to provide students opportunities to engage with one another and connect with the instructor.

Many of our students joined the live virtual platform while working the cash register at grocery stores, packing food at fast food drive-through lines, riding in their cars while traveling, or caring for others in their homes. In response, we gave students flexibility to have their video cameras off so that they could still participate. These voluntary synchronous classes were taped, giving those unable to attend live sessions access to the content at a more convenient time. Each student's situation was different; therefore, we provided multiple options in the delivery of content for students to maintain control over aspects of their education during a very uncertain time.

Students in field placement required new approaches of support due to the abrupt switch to interning remotely. Clear and consistent communication was key during this time, as there were changes occurring daily due to COVID-19. The Council of Social Work Education provided flexibility in the required field hours, which was very helpful to students who had to suddenly leave campus and return home. Faculty liaisons offered synchronous online field seminar sessions to connect students with their field cohorts, where students could process this new

phase of their internship experience and share ideas on how to continue to best serve their clients and field placement agencies. Our agency field supervisors exhibited tremendous flexibility with our students, as they were also adapting to working remotely with their clients.

Finally, when considering the specific needs of our students, we modified assignments, changed due dates, or even omitted assignments that did not seem appropriate and helpful to the learning experience of the students. All these approaches considered the students' unique situations and required that we meet students where they were at, like how social workers approach other aspects of social work practice. Students later shared that these faculty approaches modeled well how professional social workers should respond to others in practice.

Throughout this unique and challenging time, faculty had to notice individual and collective student needs, elicit feedback, and respond appropriately to ensure that we were considering the dignity and worth of our students in our approach. We suggest that, as a strategy, programs consider modeling these examples of grace and compassion—not only to students, but also to fellow faculty, staff, and field placement agencies—in order to identify unique ways in which students are able to complete their field placements and feel supported, while also lessening the heavy feeling of burden as a result of the pandemic, racial unrest, and other social determinants of health.

Ethical Principle: "Social Workers Recognize the Central Importance of Human Relationships" (NASW, 2017)

During COVID-19, the state mandate to socially distance severely limited the types of human interactions that individuals could have with each other. During the stay-at-home order, individuals were only allowed to leave their houses for essential activities. Even as the state slowly opened up, we were not allowed to gather in large groups and, if we did, we needed to stay at least six feet apart. Social distancing had the potential to lead to severe social isolation. As faculty, we were cognizant that social isolation, coupled with the experiences of racial injustices, could undoubtedly negatively impact students' support systems, mental health, and learning.

Our Response to "Recognize the Central Importance of Human Relationships"

To address social isolation and its anticipated negative consequences, we made sure to do frequent check-ins with students. If students did not turn in assignments, we would often email the student as a follow-up to make sure the student was okay. Often it was the case that the student was dealing with an emergency family situation, overwhelmed by the effects of the violent murders of Black individuals that were occurring, caring for a family member with COVID-19, suffering the effects of lack of childcare, or dealing with financial strain from losing a job. We allowed the space for students to process this with us either via email or over Zoom.

We also increased our accessibility. Because face-to-face office hours were not possible, faculty held regular weekly office hours via Zoom. As students' schedules were disrupted (due to loss of childcare, having to adjust to homeschooling, working a front-line job, etc.), we made sure to

explain that we were also accessible at other times. Finally, we made sure to respond to emails in a more timely manner. During a typical semester, faculty are expected to respond to student email within 24 hours Monday through Thursday and the next business day Friday through Sunday. However, while teaching during COVID-19, most faculty responded to emails within 12 hours.

As a strategy, we suggest that other programs consider extending the reach of their current supports: for example, extending office hours in order to accommodate student availability and offering students virtual spaces such as Zoom for check-ins in addition to traditional emails. The latter can be used for unexpected benefits, as well: one possibility we considered was a Zoom room to serve as a "virtual hallway" where students can log in to socialize with their peers and faculty—similar to what happens within departments pre-pandemic.

Conclusion

In summary, three NASW ethical principles, *social justice*, *dignity and worth*, and *human relationships*, informed multiple changes that our Department of Social Work made to aspects of social work education during the pandemic and times of social injustices. Our Department responded by creating flexible due dates, offering the option of Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grading, issuing a statement of solidarity, moving to online education, modifying field education requirements, creating safe spaces for students, and increasing faculty accessibility.

Research is beginning to emerge on social work student perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on students' educational experiences (Council on Social Work Education, 2020). Future research should investigate whether responses similar to those we have described were perceived by students as beneficial. These data could inform departments' future responses to pandemics and their continued responses to the ongoing racial injustices Black people experience in the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the deeply rooted racial disparities in our society have radically impacted social work education—there is a distinct need for accountability felt given our ethical principles. At the core of social work is the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), which serves as a central guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers. The three ethical principles described in this paper served as a lens through which the leadership team and faculty in our department navigated the effects of the pandemic and racial disparities on our diverse student body, as well as provided a barometer to ensuring those who were significantly impacted also felt seen through a direct call to action. Further exploration of the remaining ethical principles of integrity, competence, and service could be made as we strive to provide a student-centered approach during a global pandemic and a continued time of racial injustice. While there is still much work to be done, our department is committed to approaching racial injustices and disparities from an anti-racist and inclusive approach.

References

Bailey, Z. D., Krieger, N., Agénor, M., Graves, J., Linos, N., & Bassett, M. T. (2017). Structural

racism and health inequities in the USA: Evidence and interventions. *The Lancet*, *389*(10077), 1453–1463. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)30569-X

Blakeney, A. M. (2005). Antiracist pedagogy: Definition, theory, and professional development. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *2*(1), 119–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2005.10411532

Council on Social Work Education. (2020). *Social work student perceptions: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on educational experience and goals*. https://www.cswe.org/Research-Statistics/Impact-of-Covid-19-Pandemic-on-Educational-Experi e.aspx

Egede, L. E., & Walker, R. J. (2020). Structural racism, social risk factors, and Covid-19—A dangerous convergence for Black Americans. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *383*, e77(1)-e77(3). https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2023616

Hall, W. J., Chapman, M. V., Lee, K. M., Merino, Y. M., Thomas, T. W., Payne, B. K., Eng, E., Day, S. H., & Coyne-Beasley, T. (2015). Implicit racial/ethnic bias among health care professionals and its influence on health care outcomes: A systematic review. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(12), e60–e76. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302903

Killerby, M. E., Link-Gelles, R., Haight, S. C., Schrodt, C. A., England, L., Gomes, D. J., Shamout, M., Pettrone, K., O'Laughlin, K., Kimball, A., Blau, E. F., Burnett, E., Ladva, C. N., Szablewski, C. M., Tobin-D'Angelo, M., Oosmanally, N., Drenzek, C., Murphy, D. J., Blum, J. M., … CDC COVID-19 Response Clinical Team. (2020). Characteristics associated with hospitalization among patients with COVID-19—Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia, March–April, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report [MMWR]*, *69*(25), 790–794. http://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6925e1

Kishimoto, K. (2018). Anti-racist pedagogy: From faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *21*(4), 540–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248824

Milam, A. J., Furr-Holden, D., Edwards-Johnson, J., Webb, B., Patton, J. W., Ezekwemba, N. C., Porter, L., Davis, T., Chukwurah, M., Webb, A. J., Simon, K., Franck, G., Anthony, J., Onuoha, G., Brown, I. M., Carson, J. T., & Stephens, B. C. (2020). Are clinicians contributing to excess African American Covid-19 deaths? Unbeknownst to them, they may be. *Health Equity*, *4*(1), 139–141. https://doi.org/10.1089/heq.2020.0015

Millett, G. A., Jones, A. T., Benkeser, D., Baral, S., Mercer, L., Beyrer, C., Honermann, B., Lankiewicz, E., Mena, L., Crowley, J. S., Sherwood, J., & Sullivan, P. S. (2020). Assessing differential impacts of COVID-19 on black communities. *Annals of Epidemiology*, *47*, 37–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2020.05.003

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics*.

https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English

Nelson, A. R. (2003). Unequal treatment: Report of the institute of medicine on racial and ethnic disparities in healthcare. *The Annals of Thoracic Surgery*, *76*(4), PS1377–S1381. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0003-4975(03)01205-0

Paradies, Y., Ben, J., Denson, N., Elias, A., Priest, N., Pieterse, A., Gupta, A., Kelaher, M., & Gee, G. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS One*, *10*(9), 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138511

Price-Haywood, E. G., Burton, J., Fort, D., & Seoane, L. (2020). Hospitalization and mortality among black patients and white patients with Covid-19. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 382*, 2534–2543. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMsa2011686

Stokes, E. K., Zambrano, L. D., Anderson, K. N., Marder, E. P., Raz, K. M., El Burai Felix, S., Tie, Y., & Fullerton, K. E. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 case surveillance—United States, January 22–May 30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report [MMWR]*, *69*(24), 759–765. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6924e2

University of North Carolina Greensboro. (n.d.). *Voices around campus*. https://racialequity.uncg.edu/university-wide-statements/

Williams, D. R., Lawrence, J. A., & Davis, B. A. (2019). Racism and health: Evidence and needed research. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *40*, 105–125. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040218-043750

*About the Authors***:** Danielle C. Swick, PhD is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC (336-334-5147, dcswick@uncg.edu); Yarneccia D. Dyson, PhD is Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC (336-334-5147, yddyson@uncg.edu); Elizabeth Webb MSW, LCSW, LSSW is Academic Professional Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC (336-334-5147, edwebb@uncg.edu).